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Horace Greeley and the Politics of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America

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Review

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Snay, Mitchell *Horace Greeley and the Politics of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. Rowman & Littlefield, \$34.99 ISBN 978-0-7425-5100-8

A Fresh Look at Reform Politics

When Whig-turned-Republican Abraham Lincoln ran for Senate against Stephen Douglass in 1858, the mercurial editor of the *New York Tribune* chose to support Douglass. How could this be? Horace Greeley was the most important Whig journalist in the country; like Lincoln, he joined the Republican Party at its formation, his newspaper was mandatory reading across a wide demographic; he had worked to advance Whig causes his whole professional life. But the political culture of Jacksonian and antebellum politics was tricky, by 1858 the stakes could not have gotten much higher, and Greeley had a couple of reasons for his decision.

Mitchell Snay's contribution to the Rowman and Littlefield series of "American Profiles" situates Greeley deep in the milieu of antebellum public life and tries to untangle the many contradictions of his politics. Above all, this profile grapples with one public man's effort to work his way through a nation that was simultaneously entering a period of robust economic growth and disintegrating politically. Greeley did much to define the modern newspaper, but he was also deeply invested in social reform movements and (like all newspaper editors of his day) an unabashed political partisan. Participating in causes ranging from antislavery to temperance, and voicing opinions on issues ranging from workers' rights (which he opposed) to immigrants' rights (which he supported), Greeley's paper and private writings are an apt vantage point from which to map the complexity of antebellum public life.

Snay begins by placing Greeley within a well-understood Whig context of Whig politics and social reform. Greeley sought moral improvement, believed in

a civic-republican model of politics, had a paternalistic attitude toward industrialization, thought of himself as a progressive in politics and culture, but was also deeply suspicious of social disorder. From the cultural point of view, Snay breaks Greeley's career into chronological phases—the rise of the Whig Party, the construction of a national newspaper, reform, antislavery, war, and reconstruction. The book is strongly focused on political history, detailing Greeley's assessment of candidates for national office and analyzing his participation in elections. Though Greeley only briefly held political office, by the mid-1840s he was a major figure in the Whig Party—as influential in formulating the Whig agenda as he was in promoting it in his paper. By the time the Whigs collapsed and the Republicans emerged, Snay presents a figure who is beginning to fall behind the curve of events, as though he failed to realize the depth of the divisions that caused the Civil War and allowed it to take such a human toll. Though the narrative loses its footing a touch in his analysis of Greeley in the Civil War, in his the analysis of Greeley's post-war efforts on behalf of reconciliation, Snay ends by regrounding Greeley in the kind of reformist idealism that allowed his newspaper to gain such purchase early in his career.

The apparatus of the "American Profiles" series is irritating—no notes for the extensive quotations, and no ability to distinguish between accessible, published sources and manuscript sources. This format leaves a significant source such as James Parton completely absent from the list of sources. That aside, Snay's book nicely threads the needle between two other recent appraisals of Horace Greeley. It is similar in outlook to Robert Chadwell Williams's longer *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (NYU, 2006) which at almost 500 pages includes much more information on Greeley's private life, but, like Snay's, is an accessible text focused on using Greeley's manifold involvements to describe the era. Equally, Adam Tuchinsky's *Horace Greeley's New York Tribune: Civil War Era Socialism and the Crisis of Free Labor* (Cornell, 2009) is more narrowly focused on one of the central contradictions in Greeley's career. Snay's *Horace Greeley*, offers a clear and readable account of the inseparability of politics and reform in one of the most densely imbricated periods of American history. In its success it underscores how much more might be said about the public world in which Horace Greeley acted.

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